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Review: *Victorian Art Criticism and the Woman Writer*

Victorian Art Criticism and the Woman Writer by John Paul M. Kanwit

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on the dynamics of compositional *process* over a finished verbal *product* would seem to distinguish literary pragmatism from old-fashioned formalism, one nevertheless senses a recurring tension between Grimstad's admiration for the restless animation and movement in the prose of his writers and his commitment to explaining how this energy is "made shareable through the amassed decisions of composition" (p. 13). The implication remains that there is some meaningful fit to be achieved between the way things truly are and their mode of expression—that the very porousness of mind and nature calls for a prose style supple enough to be true to the peculiarities of its experience.

The connection Grimstad draws in *Experience and Experimental Writing* between the loosening hold of certain philosophical oppositions and the emergence of literary experimentalism is valuable and important. It is an insight scholars will want to address and refine. One readily thinks of further examples such as Walt Whitman and Emily Dickinson, for whom writing expressly involved a lifelong, continuous project as opposed to the production of discrete, bounded texts. One wonders, too, about possible connections between the stylistic experimentalism Grimstad calls attention to and the more general breakdown and reshuffling of generic categories taking place in the antebellum period. We may call a sentimental blockbuster like *Uncle Tom's Cabin* a novel, but in reality it is a hodgepodge of social satire, Christian allegorizing, Gothic melodrama, and regional sketches, just as the bestselling author of the time, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, mixed and matched a dazzling variety of verse forms, meters, and idioms throughout his long career. This sort of hybrid, ad hoc experimentalism, while different from the phenomenon studied by Grimstad, does nevertheless seem cognate with it and suggests further variations of a trend that Grimstad has so capably expounded here.

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JOHN PAUL M. KANWIT, *Victorian Art Criticism and the Woman Writer*. Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2013. Pp. xii + 180. \$58.95.

In *Victorian Art Criticism and the Woman Writer*, John Paul M. Kanwit sets out to shed new light on "the development of specialized art commentary in a period when art education became

a national concern in Britain" (p. 1), by training his eye on a series of female critics and novelists and interrogating their intersections with a body of ongoing conversations about art and design. Beginning with a contention that existing scholarship "has often been restricted to a narrow collection of writers on art" (p. 1), Kanwit wants to enlarge the circle of who we think of when we think of Victorian writers on art. To do so, he draws attention to "influential but now less well-known critics" (p. 1) like Anna Jameson, Elizabeth Eastlake, and Emilia Dilke, as well as to novelists who incorporated art into their fiction such as Elizabeth Gaskell, Charlotte Brontë, Anne Brontë, and George Eliot. In his drive to expand our sense of who was writing about art, Kanwit also makes a bid to enlarge our sense of what was being written about, and important loci for him include such varied sites as the Parliamentary hearings of the 1835–36 Select Committee on the State of Arts and Manufactures, early Victorian debates about household taste, the Manchester Art Treasures Exhibition of 1857, mid-Victorian depictions of galleries by novelists, and 1870s-centered controversies over Walter Pater and James McNeill Whistler. Through attention to his chosen writers and debates, Kanwit argues, we gain the ability to reconsider women's contributions to art criticism's professional formation, the capacity to see a possible (and previously missed) "feminist aesthetic in women's art criticism" (p. 4), and the chance to trace "the influences of Victorian art critics on literary representations" (p. 6), among other boons. The conclusion to the book represents a departure both from Kanwit's feminist focus and from the nineteenth century, and concerns conversations around the September 11 memorial at the World Trade Center. For Kanwit, the link is that "many of these commentaries reveal a familiar urge to order the public through high aesthetic culture" (p. 9).

Kanwit's aims are admirably ambitious here, and his range of intended consideration is wide. His juxtapositions and pairings—holding Gaskell's industrial novels up against discourses on household taste, for example, or thinking about Dilke's writings on Impressionism in relation to Pater's—are suggestive, and in important ways Kanwit's book attains something of the corrective end it strives for, by raising thoughtful questions about the role of "the critical interventions of women critics alongside [those of] canonical and lesser-known male critics" (p. 3). His readings of novelistic scenes are often illuminating, and within the individual chapters there are many interesting insights into particular texts (into the role of flowers as an index of sympathetic characters in *North and South*, say, or the importance of perception in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*). There is also a very

good attention paid to the nuances of particular careers, and while sometimes the contradictions and ambiguities that naturally hang over these aspects can muddle the argumentative through line—the chapter on Elizabeth Eastlake, for example, is full of many interesting vignettes from the life of a fascinating woman, but it can be hard to keep in view Kanwit's main argument, which is that Eastlake was “instrumental in developing art criticism as a literary form” (p. 67)—Kanwit generally pays good (if sometimes overly insistent) attention to difficulty and subtlety. Regrettably, however, Kanwit too often fails to stage his arguments in a consistently convincing manner, and the book is marred somewhat by issues of organization and of scholarly procedure, as well as by inadequate documentation and blinkered research.

Structurally, one of the book's strengths—its breadth of consideration—risks turning into a problem on a global level. Across the book more largely, and certainly within the introduction, it is sometimes hard to tease out how all of the moving parts are meant to come together—which concerns should be thought of as most central, and who or what has influenced whom. (The vocabulary of “alongside” above is telling). There is a certain unevenness to the depth of consideration of the chapters, and, as a rule, Kanwit's chapters dealing with particular figures or particular texts are more convincingly argued than his chapters about moments or trends in the art world (i.e., chapters 1 and 5), because their aims and relations are more fully worked out.

The most significant problem hampering Kanwit's study, however, has to do with scholarly method, and it is impossible in reading this book not to wonder at the lack of citation and the many moments of undocumented, or unqualified but questionable, assertion. At best, these moments merely involve a lack of precision. When, for example, Kanwit suggests that “Gaskell is more flexible than some contemporary male writers in sometimes allowing her lower- and middle-class homeowners to mimic those in higher positions” (p. 38), this is a fine point, but one wants to know which male authors he has in mind. Similarly, when he makes the claim that “some guidebooks [at Manchester] questioned the provenance of many artworks, while others made no mention of these problems” (p. 104), one would like to know the names of some exemplary guidebooks he has in view.

Imprecision often shades into something that might be looked upon as scholarly irresponsibility or even inaccuracy, however, and there are many junctures when Kanwit makes claims that are perfectly reasonable—for instance, that “by the mid-Victorian period . . . narrative

painting became the most popular genre" (p. 15), or that "the *Dublin University Magazine* and other periodicals contended that the written information provided at Manchester was not sufficient for guiding the public" (p. 104), or that "middle-class women became the largest single group of gallery visitors during the Victorian period" (p. 113). But surely these claims require a form of documentation and specification they do not receive. Whose research backs up these assertions? And in which discipline? How is "most popular" measured, and as far as which population was concerned? At what point and where was the argument "contended"? What kind of galleries, and when did such visitation take place?

There are also many junctures—too many for a scholarly work—where Kanwit dresses as fact what is actually argument, and this makes it hard to have a relation of full trust to his prose. His apparent statement of fact early on, for instance, that in the early Victorian period "new institutions, most prominently the National Gallery, were created to educate this expanded audience [of the broad public]" (p. 20) is not actually a statement of fact but a debatable claim, since many of the Gallery's architects saw conservation or the jingoistic performance of British might as the main purpose of the Gallery's inception (often with disdain for education as a competitive end). This complexity is addressed obliquely much later in Kanwit's book, but most scholars would address it in the first instance, with sources supporting their own view of the Gallery's founding and an acknowledgment of contrary views of the same. This local moment of blurring between fact and claim is metonymic of a much larger tendency, and overall it is very hard not to be struck by the fact that the book has a general paucity of footnotes.

It is also hard not to notice the absence from the bibliography of some major recent work in the field. These missing sources can hover locally: Elaine Freedgood's chapter on the curtains of *Mary Barton* in *The Ideas in Things: Fugitive Meaning in the Victorian Novel* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2006) seems a natural interlocutor for the section of Kanwit's Gaskell chapter that deals with textiles and décor (curtains included), for example; and Lara Kriegel's work on design education in *Grand Designs: Labor, Empire, and the Museum in Victorian Culture* (Durham, N.C.: Duke Univ. Press, 2007) would appear to be a necessary site of engagement for the part of Kanwit's book that concerns design education. Globally, though, and most signally, Kanwit's work clearly stands in prospective dialogue with Rachel Teukolsky's impressive account of Victorian art writing in *The Literate Eye: Victorian Art Writing and Modernist Aesthetics* (New York: Oxford Univ.

Press, 2009), and yet Teukolsky's work—which knocks down many of the straw men about Victorian criticism that structure Kanwit's own—is nowhere to be found. On the one hand, one wants to be generous about these omissions, since the unhappy lot of every scholar is to worry about belatedness; one knows one's own work is invariably missing possible points of conversation. On the other hand, the listed books have been out for some years, and particularly with regard to Teukolsky's work, it is hard not to feel that there is a missed opportunity here—in fact a way for Kanwit to sharpen the terms and stakes of his project, since *The Literate Eye*, for all its many wonderful virtues, does not spend overly much time thinking about female critics and their fortunes.

In the end, *Victorian Art Criticism and the Woman Writer* is laudable for its ambitions, and it is to be appreciated for its efforts to recover the work of a variety of interesting and complicated women in pushing forward new aesthetic theories and a new shape for art criticism. There is also a redolent air of missed opportunity here, however, and the book's refusal to participate in full ways in scholarly dialogue makes it too easy to refuse its own scholarly claims.

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CALEB SMITH, *The Oracle and the Curse: A Poetics of Justice from the Revolution to the Civil War*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2013. Pp. xvi + 264. \$35.

In *The Oracle and the Curse: A Poetics of Justice from the Revolution to the Civil War*, Caleb Smith weaves together an impressive account of the rapid changes in views of legal and moral authority in antebellum America, as reflected in and fostered by both court cases and rulings as well as the literary works of a variety of authors. The title frames the issues discussed in terms of the “oracle” (a God-breathed judgment of divine authority from within the regular court system) pitted against the “curse” (the ravings of those outside the regular systems of justice). The populace of the United States had to deal with “the incendiary speech acts of dissenters, militants, and self-styled martyrs” invoking some version of “a ‘higher law’” (p. ix). Smith, drawing liberally from a number of earlier critics, argues that “criminal trials, especially, were occasions for the legitimation of state power” (p. ix), with the judges acting as “the living